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Sally Hemming’s Family Portrait

Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman of mixed race owned by President Thomas Jefferson, has become an emblematic figure in American history. Her life and legacy are complex and multifaceted, reflecting the deeply intertwined histories of slavery and freedom in the United States. Hemings was born in 1773, and historical accounts suggest she was the half-sister of Jefferson's wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson, sharing the same father, John Wayles. The Hemings family came to live at Jefferson's Monticello estate as part of Martha's inheritance upon her father's death.

Despite the lack of visual records—no known portraits of Sally Hemings or her immediate family exist—her story has been pieced together through written historical records and oral histories. According to her son Madison Hemings, Sally's father was indeed John Wayles, making her three-quarters European by ancestry and a half-sister to Martha Wayles Jefferson. This complex family tree is a stark representation of the blurred lines between owner and owned, and the intimate, often coercive relationships that existed within the institution of slavery.

Sally Hemings is believed to have had at least six children with Thomas Jefferson, four of whom survived to adulthood. Their lives were a testament to the paradox of their existence, being both the children of a founding father and his property. Over time, the Hemings children were granted privileges not commonly afforded to enslaved people; some were allowed to "escape" slavery, while others were formally freed by Jefferson's will or through informal arrangements.

The legacy of Sally Hemings and her children is a subject of ongoing research, debate, and interest. It challenges us to confront the complexities of American history, the realities of slavery, and the

narratives we construct around our national figures. The Hemings family's story is not just a footnote in the biography of a president; it is a central chapter in the American narrative, one that continues to influence discussions about race, identity, and memory in the United States.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in telling a more complete and inclusive history of Monticello and the people who lived and worked there. This includes the Hemings family, whose contributions and experiences are integral to understanding the full context of Jefferson's life and the early years of the United States. As historians and researchers continue to delve into

the archives, each discovery adds depth to the portrait of Sally Hemings and her descendants—a portrait not of oil and canvas, but of stories, recollections, and the enduring legacy they left behind.